

THE GERMAN REVOLUTION

1918-1919

A. J. RYDER



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LIKE OTHER revolutions the German revolution of November 1918 was a product of different causes, some of which formed part of the events immediately preceding it, while others belonged to the less recent past. The revolution began as the improvised revolt of an exhausted and disillusioned population against an authoritarian regime which had brought the country to the verge of defeat. Though it never entirely lost the spontaneous character with which it began, the revolution's further course, after its initial success, was shaped by the attempt of the Left wing of the German socialists to transform it into the classic Marxist revolution to which they had long looked forward. It soon became clear to the Left that the victory of 9 November was largely illusory, but its attempt to extend the revolution was resisted by the Right wing socialists, who had the support of the rest of the population. If the first stage of the revolution was marked by the apparently complete collapse of the old order, its second stage was characterized by an internecine conflict between the two socialist parties which developed into a form of civil war. The Left's attempt to seize power was defeated, but in defeating it the Right had to use means (the Freikorps) which weakened its position and reduced the gains of November. In one sense the failure of the revolution was already evident in January 1919; in a more general sense its failure was not complete till Hitler's accession to power in 1933 destroyed what remained of German democracy. The half-completed revolution left a legacy of unsolved problems to the Weimar republic, and there came into existence an uneasy balance of forces between the Right wing socialists and their allies, who were concerned to defend and consolidate what had been gained; the revolutionaries, who, though temporarily defeated, still believed in the victory of their cause; and the counter-revolutionaries, whose efforts to undermine the republic began as early as the summer of 1919.

The three main strands in the German revolution may be described as democratization, demilitarization and socialization. Democratization was the task which fell to German democrats, Left-wing liberals as well as socialists, as the result of the failure of the 1848 revolution and of Bismarck's defeat of liberalism. But the desire of the German middle-class parties for a democratic regime was, to say the least, lukewarm; the struggle for democracy therefore had to be waged by the Social Democrats with little outside help. Closely connected with democracy, in the minds of socialists, was socialism. If democracy meant little to them without socialism, they realized that socialism was obtainable only through democracy, for the Social Democratic party (S.P.D.) could put its programme of socialization into effect only if it commanded the majority in a Reichstag that had real power. Both democracy and socialism were contained, implicitly or explicitly, in the S.P.D.'s programme of 1891, which was known as the Erfurt programme from the scene of the conference where it was adopted and which remained the party's official programme till 1921. Demilitarization, the third strand in the German revolution, was of a rather different character. Though it was implied, briefly, in the Erfurt programme, and though it followed logically from the desire to abolish the semi-absolutist state in which the army was not subordinate to the civilian power, it did not possess the same ideological importance as democratization and socialization. In practice, however, the desire for thorough-going reform of the army and for the abolition of all military privilege was one of the strongest impulses in the German revolution. But it was not until the old regime had been discredited by losing the war and presenting the country with the consequences of total defeat that the forces of revolt were strong enough to defy it openly; and even then enough of the old regime survived to make the November revolution a less far-reaching change than appeared on the surface.

I. The Prelude to the Revolution.

The Russian Revolution of March 1917 was interpreted in Germany, especially on the Left, as a warning signal. The government's reaction was to make gestures in favour of constitutional reform, but the measures were half-measures and

were pursued half-heartedly. The Emperor's Easter message in April 1917 announced a modest liberalization of the Three-class Prussian franchise; this was generally felt, by liberals as well as socialists, to be the very minimum required by the situation. Even this cautious and overdue attempt at reform was blocked by the opposition of the Prussian conservatives, whose sudden change (of tactics, not of heart), in October 1918, came too late to save the Prussian Landtag, which in its existing form was swept away by the revolution. The success of the Russian revolutionaries was felt as an encouragement by the socialists, especially those of the Left. The German socialist movement, which had been united until the war, was divided after April 1917 into two parties: besides the S.P.D. or majority socialists, as they were now called, there was an Independent Social Democratic party (U.S.P.D.) which consisted of the older party's former Left wing. The reason for the split was a difference over war aims. The S.P.D. voted for war credits, supporting, with some misgivings, the Government's claim that Germany was fighting a defensive war, while the U.S.P.D. held that the war was not defensive for Germany since its government had annexationist ambitions. The Independents' ideal was peace without victors or vanquished, but they were in no position to enforce this policy on the German government or generals. Loosely attached to the Independents were the Spartacists, whose main leaders, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were in prison after 1916 and remained there till October 1918. The Spartacists, like Lenin, wanted to turn the war into a revolutionary civil war and were completely internationalist in outlook. Their strictly logical and theoretical interpretation of Marxism had little influence among the masses, who disliked the war but could not deny the principle of national defence. Yet the masses were becoming more impatient. In the winter of 1916-17, the full harshness of the blockade was felt for the first time. A cut in the bread ration in April 1917 provoked a strike in Berlin and other cities, among them Leipzig. In Leipzig the strike was led by a workers' council and presented political as well as economic demands. This was the first time such a council had been formed or such demands presented. It showed the influence of the Russian revolution on the German working class.

Another result of the Russian revolution was the Stockholm peace movement. Its failure in the summer of 1917 was a disappointment to German socialists, especially the Independents, who had put forward very reasonable terms of peace. Desire for peace with Russia and indignation with the German government's delaying tactics in negotiating it at Brest Litovsk were the main motives behind a large-scale strike of munition workers which broke out in January 1918. The strikers, who numbered a million all told, also demanded Prussian franchise reform, better food and abolition of the state of siege—all demands which were to be repeated during the early days of the revolution. The strike was the last important manifestation of large-scale discontent before the revolution. Though it did not achieve its objects, it was significant as showing the organized will of a large section of the working class despite the prevailing state of siege, which made strikes illegal in Germany, and despite the lack of enthusiasm for strike action of the S.P.D., which did not wish to embarrass the government. Moreover, the committee which led the strike remained in being, and its leader, Emil Barth, began to prepare for the revolution by collecting money and arms and training "shock troops". Barth and his colleague, Richard Müller, who had been conscripted for the part he had played in the strike movement, were both representatives of Left wing shop stewards or *Obleute*. These *Obleute* stood to the official Trade Unionists in much the same relation as the Independent socialists stood to the majority socialists, though they were more extreme than most of the Independents, of whose part they henceforward formed the militant Left wing. It was in the course of 1918, too, that the impact of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia became powerful in the U.S.P.D. It cannot be measured with any exactness, but it can be seen in the demand for a policy of proletarian dictatorship, which was supported by leaders of the *Obleute* and their political friends. On the other hand, the smaller Right wing of the Independents, which included the party theoretician and veteran journalist Karl Kautsky, was highly critical of the Bolsheviks, whose anti-democratic example they did not wish to follow.

There was a lull in political activity in the spring and summer of 1918 while Ludendorff's great offensive was unleashed. Despite the tactical success it achieved it failed to

bring a decision, and with the Allied counter-attack in August Ludendorff realized that Germany could not win the war. The retreat began. In mid-September the Austrian government asked for an armistice; by the end of September the Bulgarians had capitulated. Ludendorff told the government that the army could not wait 48 hours; armistice negotiations must be started immediately. It was decided to broaden the basis of government; this necessitated the appointment of a new Chancellor. Prince Max of Baden, a cousin of the reigning Duke of Baden, became Chancellor of a government which was based on popular support. The S.P.D. were invited, and agreed after some hesitation, to join the government on terms which included the restoration of Belgium with reparations for war damage, parliamentary government in the Reich and equal franchise in Prussia. The overdue constitutional changes were passed by the Reichstag in October; they made the government responsible to the Reichstag, enabled members of the Reichstag to become ministers (which hitherto had been impossible, under the terms of the constitution) and subordinated the military authorities to the civilian. Germany became a constitutional monarchy. This was the "revolution from above". It came too late to have the desired effect. Abroad it was seen as a panic move, designed to avert the consequences of defeat; at home public opinion demanded stronger measures. The reality of the Reichstag's new power was not apparent, for it had followed behind events, not determined them. Prince Max was by no means ideally qualified to stand as the leader of the new democracy; constitutional reforms seemed unimportant to the man in the street, who saw that defeat was now inevitable and that the state of siege and the censorship, against which there was considerable resentment, were still being administered by generals. The S.P.D. now found themselves playing a double role: as a popular party they still wished to lead popular discontent, as a government party they had to suppress it. The S.P.D. had long been reformist not revolutionary in outlook, and this trend had been strengthened by the experience of the war years and the defection of the Left wing as the Independent socialist party. Now the party was more or less satisfied with the reforms of October and most of its leaders were prepared to keep the monarchy. The Independent socialists, on the other

hand, saw events moving rapidly in their direction. They expected the majority socialists to be discredited by their last minute entry into an unpopular government, as they were already discredited in the eyes of the Independents for having so long supported the government's disastrous war policy. The Independents only demanded a republic and socialism, there was talk in the Berlin factories in mid-October of an Independent government, and one Independent member of the Reichstag urged the outbreak of world revolution.

Prince Max had begun his armistice negotiations with President Wilson on the night of 3/4 October. He was desperately embarrassed by the Emperor William II's refusal to listen to demands for his abdication, which appeared in a thinly veiled form in Wilson's Third Note of 23 October, and openly among almost all sections of the German population. In the mood of panic which swept over the country the dismissal on 26 October of Ludendorff, the real embodiment of German militarism, made little impact; and Max's government was doomed when the S.P.D. on 7 November sent an ultimatum demanding the Emperor's abdication within 24 hours. It fell on the 9th, with the withdrawal of the S.P.D. members, Scheidemann and Bauer. With Ludendorff went the last chance of a final desperate stand, *a levée en masse*, which Max, rightly no doubt, rejected as futile; but he had not been able to achieve his two main aims of signing the armistice and holding the support of the majority socialists. The latter would now be forced to share office with the Independent socialists, and the revolution, which he knew Ebert did not want, would be inevitable.

Meanwhile the leaders of the Left had not been idle. Nor had they found agreement easy. Barth and his revolutionary committee discussed dates for a rising; the vote of the *Obleute* secured the later of the alternatives (probably 11 November). Haase, the leader of the Independent socialist party, who attended the meeting, advised caution; he preferred to wait for the revolution to mature as the culmination of an inevitable process, rather than force the issue. Barth wrote of Haase that he refused to consider what should be done on "the morning after the revolution". If Haase was a lukewarm revolutionary, who, like all the Right wing of the Independents, believed in parliamentary methods, the Spartacists, in

Barth's view, erred in the other direction, for they wished to indulge in what he scornfully but not inaccurately described as "revolutionary gymnastics". Thus on the eve of the revolution the Left was divided over policy and tactics. The Spartacists knew best what they wanted; on 7 October they met and issued a demand for dictatorship of the proletariat exercised through workers' and soldiers' councils, the nationalization of all property and the reorganization of the army so as to give power to the soldiers. They had no use for parliament, declaring:

The struggle for real democratization is not concerned with parliament, franchise or parliamentary ministers and similar swindles; it is concerned with the real bases of all enemies of the people: ownership of land and capital, power over the armed forces and over justice.

Unambiguous as the Spartacists' programme was, they lacked the numbers which would have enabled them to carry it out. Moreover, unlike the Bolsheviki, whose German counterpart they were, they shared with the rest of the German Left a predilection for organizational freedom and an aversion to the growing centralization and bureaucracy of the S.P.D., from which they, as party rebels, had suffered. The Independent socialists were still at loggerheads, not, as before, over war policy, but over the question of revolution; and the party's loose structure, which enabled the Right and Left wings to coexist in one party, weakened it as a revolutionary force. But while the leaders of the left in Berlin were still deliberating, the provinces acted.

II. *The Sailors' Revolt and the Revolution in the Provinces*

On 28 October the German Admiralty ordered the navy, which was assembled at Wilhelmshaven on the North Sea, to put to sea for a final battle with the British fleet. The sailors refused to obey. The order was repeated, again refused, and then withdrawn. The sailors complained of their bad food, and their overbearing officers; there had already been an abortive rising in 1917, intended as a demonstration in favour of the Stockholm formula for a compromise peace. Now,

when an armistice was near, they saw no point in sacrificing themselves to satisfy the officers' desire for death with honour. When one of the squadrons arrived at Kiel sailors demonstrated in the streets, made revolutionary speeches, rioted, suffered some casualties, and elected sailors' councils. At this point the government sent Noske, a prominent Right wing S.P.D. politician, and Haussmann, a Progressive (Left wing Liberal) member of the cabinet to Kiel to deal with the revolt. Noske, who had specialized before the war in military and naval matters, was welcomed by the sailors; shortly afterwards Haas, the U.S.P.D. leader, also arrived after a telegram of invitation. The two socialist parties were able to co-operate amicably enough, for in truth the sailors were little concerned with differences of socialist ideology. Noske was made successively chairman of the sailors' council and governor of Kiel, and found no difficulty in giving a qualified acceptance of the sailors' demand for the abdication of the Hohenzollerns, abolition of the state of siege, equal suffrage for men and women, and the liberation of political prisoners. But by now the movement had spread to other ports and inland towns. By 6 November Cuxhaven, Hamburg and Bremen were in the hands of workers' and soldiers' councils. Whereas in Kiel the revolt had been largely non-political, in Hamburg its political aim, socialism, was in the forefront from the beginning. The factory workers joined the sailors, and both were joined by the soldiers. Unable to rely on its troops, the government was powerless. In Cologne a garrison of 45,000 men went over to the revolution almost without a shot. Soon all the towns of the West and Centre were in the hands of workers' and soldiers' councils, which sprang up everywhere with remarkable spontaneity. The leaders of these councils were certainly conscious of the part which workers', soldiers' and peasants' councils had played in the Russian revolution; but, as at first in Russia, the councils were not dominated by one party nor were they usually representative of extremist views. Everywhere they claimed full authority, but they generally allowed the old officials to carry on under their supervision. There was hardly any bloodshed, for there was no opposition.

Meanwhile, independently of the events in Kiel, the revolution had begun in Bavaria. After the Austrian armistice was

signed on 2 November the Bavarians feared an Allied invasion through Austria. In Munich an Independent socialist named Kurt Eisner took the lead. Eisner, like Bernstein, the leader of the Revisionist or Right wing group on the pre-war S.P.D., had moved to the Left of the party in 1914 owing to his strong internationalist sympathies and opposition to the party's war policy. On 6 November he addressed a demonstration in Munich which was followed by a march, in the course of which the public buildings were occupied. Bavaria was declared a republic. The majority socialists, who greatly outnumbered the Independents in Bavaria, joined Eisner, who formed a new government consisting of both kinds of socialists with some "bourgeois specialists". Here, as elsewhere, the new government was formally approved by a workers' and soldiers' council. Eisner announced that elections would be held for a new *Landtag*, and he optimistically declared that the fratricidal struggle between the two socialist parties was at an end. Even the Bavarian peasants, usually among the most conservative elements in Germany, elected rural councils, almost the only ones to appear in the German revolution.

In Central Germany, and especially in the industrial parts of Saxony, the revolution had a more markedly Left wing character. There the Independents, followed by the majority socialists, proclaimed a republic and declared the government deposed. The elected leaders of the workers' and soldiers' councils of Dresden and Leipzig issued a manifesto on 14 November which asserted that the capitalist system and the bourgeois, monarchical form of government had collapsed, that power had been seized by the revolutionary proletariat, and that the economic system would be socialized, unearned income and bourgeois law-courts abolished, and the people armed to safeguard the gains of the revolution. Government was to be exercised by a cabinet of six, three from each socialist party. But the all socialist coalition did not last long; a reaction against the extremists soon set in, and their programme was never carried out.

Generalizing about the revolution in the various states and cities of Germany, one can say that the Independent socialists took the lead, even where they were very much in the minority, as in Bavaria; that after the first success of the revolution a reaction set in quickly, and the hastily formed alliance of the

two socialist parties, which had been at daggers drawn for nearly three years, ended with a refusal of the majority socialists to support the more extreme demands of the Left wing Independents and Spartacists; and that the latter found themselves trying to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat with only a part of the proletariat on their side. Sometimes a dualism existed, where the local workers' and soldiers' council functioned side by side with a pre-revolutionary elected body, such as the city parliament (*Bürgerschaft*) of Hamburg which was at first suppressed and then recalled, or with a state parliament (*Landtag*) as happened later in Bavaria. Such a dualism did not prove very satisfactory, and there was friction with the permanent officials, for it was found that administration inevitably involved some exercise of political power. Tension between councils and other elected bodies was especially marked where their political composition differed widely, as it did in Bavaria, where the Independents obtained only three seats in the elections to the *Landtag* in January 1919, compared with 66 won by the S.P.D and an even larger number won by the middle-class parties. The majority socialists feared that an attempt to carry the revolution further would result in chaos, which would cause starvation, and national disunity, which would be exploited by the victorious Allies. It was for these reasons that the all-socialist government of Prussia issued an order on 15 November that government officials should stay at their posts.

In viewing the German revolution it is as important to see what remained unchanged as to see what changed. The Hohenzollern civil service survived, where those of the Bourbons and Romanovs, in the French and Russian revolutions, did not. And significant as the revolutionary ideology was in determining the character of the policy of Left wing groups, the revolution started in areas (Schleswig-Holstein and Bavaria) where the Independent socialists were weak but where for practical reasons the desire to end the war was especially strong. All through the revolution, too, popular resentment was directed far more against the officers as a class than against capitalists or employers. Officers were stripped of their badges and epaulettes and disarmed, and throughout the Home Army power passed from the officers to the soldiers' councils.

III. *The Revolution in Berlin*

By 8 November, the day after the S.P.D. ultimatum to Prince Max of Baden, the revolution had triumphed in most parts of Germany, but Berlin remained in the hands of the government, which had concentrated its forces against the revolutionary forces which it knew to be strong there. The Kiel revolt took everyone by surprise; even Haase had had no suspicion of it beforehand. It was embarrassing to everyone on the Left as well as on the Right: to the S.P.D. because it was defiance of a government to which they belonged; to Barth and the leaders of the extreme Left because it broke out before they were able to direct and control it. The spontaneity of the revolution, which was traditionally favoured by the Left, and thanks to which the first breach in the citadel of authority had been made, meant, however, that leadership was in the hands of the politically untrained sailors instead of in those of the trained and organized *Obleute*. The government learned of Barth's plans, and Däumig, one of the conspirators and a Left wing Independent socialist, was arrested on 8 November. Barth, who believed, erroneously, that Liebknecht had also been arrested, ordered his men to make their bid for power next day. When 9 November dawned, the attitude of the S.P.D. was still uncertain; *Vorwaerts* had repeatedly urged the need for restraint and order, and the S.P.D. leaders feared "Bolshevik chaos". When, however, news of the Emperor's abdication had still not come through by 8 o'clock that morning, the order to strike was given by the S.P.D., and the workers left their factories after the morning break and streamed into the middle of the city. The *Obleute* and their followers, whose decision to strike was taken the day before, were merged in the general army of strikers, which moved with impressive singleness of purpose, as though, one eyewitness reported, in response to a single master plan, though in fact no such plan existed. Prince Max, having issued a statement announcing the Emperor's abdication which slightly anticipated the event, offered the Chancellorship to Ebert, who accepted it. Max also announced that plans were being made for the election of a Constituent National Assembly, which would decide the future constitution of Germany. He hoped, as he wrote

in his *Memoirs*, that the revolution could still be defeated and the monarchy saved, if this assembly could meet and if Ebert could be appointed Imperial Chancellor by him instead of at the hands of the mob. In this way continuity would be assured. Ebert also wanted to save the monarchy, but he abandoned this hope after Scheidemann, at about two in the afternoon, proclaimed the republic to a vast and enthusiastic crowd in front of the Reichstag. That morning one of the most reliable regiments, the 4 *Jägerbataillon*, which had been sent to Berlin to defend the government, refused to act against the revolution. The government issued an order to the troops not to fire, and the police went home. The revolutionary crowds occupied the public buildings without difficulty, including police headquarters and the Imperial palace. Liebknecht addressed the crowd from the palace, proclaiming the socialist republic. Ebert invited the Independent socialists to join the new government, and *Vorwaerts* of 10 November urged the Independents to grasp the hand of friendship held out to them.

It was not easy for the Independent socialists to decide whether to accept this offer. Differences in policy between the parties were still wide, and were exacerbated by the personal suspicion and distrust which had grown up during the war years. The Left wing Independents saw Ebert and his friends as opportunists who, having done their best to prevent revolution and repress the Independents till the very last moment, now posed as revolutionaries: as Ledebour, a veteran Left wing socialist and leading member of the U.S.P.D. put it, Ebert had smuggled himself into the revolution. Ledebour was opposed to their party taking part in a coalition with the S.P.D. Liebknecht, who shared Ledebour's distrust of Ebert, agreed that they should join the new government for three days only, in order that Germany should have a government capable of signing the armistice, but he wanted the basis of the coalition to be recognition that all legislative, executive and judicial power lay in the hands of workers' and soldiers' councils. This was too extreme a policy for the S.P.D., which, as we have seen, wished power to be exercised by a constituent assembly. In the end agreement between the two parties was reached, after the S.P.D. had accepted six conditions imposed by the Independents, the most important of which was that the constituent assembly should not

meet until after the gains of the revolution had been consolidated. This formula was vague enough to admit of widely differing interpretations, and so it happened. Majority opinion in the U.S.P.D. was that it would be a mistake to refuse to share power at this crisis, for if they stayed out they would leave the field to their rivals. Moreover, the overwhelming wish of the population, as represented in the councils, was for a socialist coalition. In these circumstances the new government was formed; it was headed by a cabinet of six People's Commissars, three of whom were majority socialists, three Independent socialists. The majority socialists were Ebert (chairman), Scheidemann and Landsberg; the Independents Haase (co-chairman with Ebert), Dittmann and Barth. As late as 10 November Ebert was still thinking in terms of a broad coalition extending from the Independents to the Liberals, but the former insisted that any bourgeois members of the government should have the status of "technical assistants" only. As the cabinet minutes show, these bourgeois ministers, who were consulted on matters such as socialization, did have considerable influence on the decisions taken.

On the afternoon of 10 November there was a meeting of about 3,000 persons, representing the workers' and soldiers' councils of Berlin, at the Circus Busch. It approved the formation of the new cabinet, but the Left wing Independents, led by Barth, who was chairman of the meeting, tried to enforce their policy on the government by proposing the election of an Executive Council which should have supreme legislative power and to which the People's Commissars should be responsible. Barth wished the Executive Council to consist entirely of Independent socialists, but his attempt to pack it was strongly opposed by the soldiers, who demanded parity between the two socialist parties in the Executive Council as in the cabinet. Finally an Executive Council was elected which consisted of 28 persons, of whom 14 were soldiers. Of the 14 civilians 7 were S.P.D., 7 U.S.P.D. The Council was later enlarged to include representatives of the parts of Germany in the East and West occupied by the Allied powers. Its exact relationship to the cabinet was not defined, and the powers it claimed were so wide as to make friction between itself and the cabinet inevitable.

It was on the same day (10 November) that Ebert had the first of his fateful telephone conversations with General Groener, who had succeeded Ludendorff as Quartermaster General. The agreement made between them was that in return for the support of the army Ebert promised to combat Bolshevism, by which was meant an attempt by the Spartacists and their friends to seize power. On his side Ebert undertook to recognize the officers' power of command in the Field Army, which Groener was trying to shield from the demoralization which had already undermined the army at home. One of the first decisions of the new cabinet was concerned with this problem, and on 12 November it sent a telegram to the High Command containing an assurance that the officers' power of command remained and that military discipline and order must be upheld under all circumstances. This policy was not liked by the Independents, but they agreed to it because they knew that, if the Field Army lost its discipline, it could not retreat in good order to a line East of the Rhine by 12 December, as was required by the armistice terms, and that any soldiers left behind would automatically become prisoners of war. Hindenburg and Groener recognized the formation of soldiers' councils in the Field Army as an inoculation—the word was their own—against more extreme measures, but ordered that they were not to replace the officers in giving orders but to limit their functions to matters of welfare.

Ebert was responsible for relations with the army in his capacity as one of the People's Commissars, but the generals still saw him as Chancellor of the Reich, which, technically, he had been during the thirty hours or so which had elapsed between his acceptance of the Chancellorship from Prince Max and his confirmation in the Circus Busch as chairman of the cabinet of People's Commissars. During this period Ebert had issued a number of decrees as Chancellor, and it was only because he was a more or less constitutionally appointed successor to Prince Max that the officers' corps and senior civil servants recognized him. Simons, who was one of Prince Max's most trusted civil servant advisers, wrote:

It is quite unthinkable that the old officers and officials would have offered their services to the new government had the Prince not given it some shred of legitimacy.

Thus by the evening of 10 November Ebert was ruling, in effect, in a double capacity. For the supporters of the old regime he was Chancellor, and there had been no organic break with the past. For the revolutionary part of the population he was chairman of a revolutionary cabinet, approved by the workers' and soldiers' councils exercising the popular will. This double commitment involved a double policy; the question was whether the various obligations which he had taken upon himself were mutually compatible. Events were shortly to show that they were not.

IV. *The Revolutionary Government and the Congress of Councils.*

It is impossible, in the space here available, to follow the course of the German revolution in detail. It must suffice to indicate the main problems which arose and how those responsible tried to solve them. As we saw at the beginning, the revolution had three aspects or strands: democratization, socialization and demilitarization. We have now to consider how far the revolution was successful under each of these headings.

The very fact that power was seized by workers' and soldiers' councils, and that the Reichstag was ignored, shows that the constitutional reforms of October had made no impact on the ordinary person. The regime was paying the price for its long resistance to reform, the Reichstag was paying the price for its long acquiescence in that policy. In form, at least, government by councils was a popular, and to a large extent, proletarian dictatorship, though many soldiers, of course, were not proletarians. But, as we have seen, the policy of most of the councils was moderate. Even where the Independents had a share of power—in Bavaria, for example—the government did not confiscate the banks or interfere with the economy. Nor did the councils conceive of themselves as a permanent substitute for parliament, as soon became clear. They came into existence to fill the vacuum left by the old regime, and they gave the ordinary man for the first time experience of the practical exercise of power. The Independent socialists had never made government by councils one of their demands, and it is significant that there is no mention of them in a policy manifesto issued by them on 5 October. But now that the councils were in

being the Independents seized on them as the institutional instrument of the revolution and relied on them to provide the revolutionary *élan* which would enable the new government to carry out its policy of socialism. There was one difficulty: the councils involved the *de facto* disfranchisement of the middle and upper classes, and were thus incompatible with the complete democracy for which socialism stood. Haase and his friends were in a dilemma: hitherto democracy and socialism had been seen as complementary, now they seemed to conflict. The escape Haase sought was to accept in principle the calling of a constituent assembly but to postpone its meeting until after the councils had had time to carry out socialization. The demand for a constituent assembly, except on the extreme Left of the U.S.P.D. and among the Spartacists, was strong and widespread, and the cabinet agreed to it, except for Barth, who on many issues found himself in a minority of one against his Independent as well as against his S.P.D. colleagues. It was agreed by Ebert that the question of a constituent assembly should be decided by a special national congress of workers' and soldiers' councils which was to meet in Berlin in the middle of December. This congress voted in favour of such an assembly by a large majority, and made the election date 19 January, a date earlier than the one originally proposed. The Right wing of the Independents accepted the decision; the Left adhered to its view that if the constituent assembly met it would kill the revolution.

Socialization was also discussed at the congress of councils and a resolution passed in favour of its being started "forth-with". It was evident at the congress as it had been in the cabinet that socialist opinion on this subject was divided between those who wanted to socialize rapidly and those who wanted to do so gradually. The cabinet had set up a socialization commission headed by Kautsky, who himself favoured a cautious approach, to inquire into the whole subject and make recommendations. The report was not ready till January, and in December, when the congress of councils met, Ebert was reluctant to legislate in advance of its findings. There was a widespread fear among socialists, Independents as well as majority socialists, that any property socialized by the government might be earmarked by the Allies for reparations.

There was also a belief that it would be unwise to socialize industry at a time when it lacked raw materials and capital, and that dislocation of industry would alarm the employers and make it harder for the economy to absorb the millions awaiting demobilization. As for land reform, entailing the break-up of the big estates east of the River Elbe, it was feared that such a move would dissuade the landowners and farmers from sowing next year's harvest, and thus endanger the country's food supply, especially as the amount of grain in stock was calculated to last only until 1 February. The attitude of the Trade Unions was affected by an agreement which had been drawn up on 18 November between them and representative employers in the Ruhr. By this, the employers recognized the Unions as the sole representatives of the workers, granted an eight-hour day without loss of wages, and agreed on the formation of arbitration committees which were to exist at different levels of industry to regulate wage claims and similar matters. The Trade Unions saw in this agreement a substantial success. The employers, who early in October had seen the revolution coming and planned this concession in order to forestall it, considered that they had thereby averted the greater danger of socialization. The extreme Left denounced the agreement as a betrayal of socialism. It certainly blunted the edge of the revolution in its economic aspect.

As for the third aspect of the revolution, demilitarization, that, too, was debated at the congress of councils, and a resolution was passed unanimously in favour of far-reaching reform of the army and its democratization. The resolution was introduced by a majority socialist from Hamburg named Lampl; hence it is usually known as the Hamburg or Lampl Points. The main provisions of the Points were that power of command in the army was to be exercised by the People's Commissars under the supervision of the Executive Council, that all badges of rank were to be abolished, that officers should be elected by the men, and that the standing army should be replaced by a popular militia. Ebert knew that the High Command would never accept these Points, and Hindenburg soon declared his rejection of them; but Ebert had not thought it politic to oppose them at the congress. The generals considered them a breach of Ebert's promise to them on 10 November. On the

other hand, the great bulk of socialist opinion, majority as well as Independent, supported them. A showdown between the socialists and the generals could no longer be avoided. In a cabinet meeting which was attended by Groener, Ebert temporized, telling Groener that the Points did not apply to the Field Army in the East (which was still deployed in what had been the Russian Empire) and that as regards the Home Army, implementation instructions would be issued shortly. Every day's delay favoured the generals, for it brought nearer the date on which the constituent assembly would meet. (Hindenburg had written to Ebert on 8 December urging, among other things, that the assembly be convened in December.) The wish of the majority of socialists of both parties had been to rely, not on the Imperial army, which was in process of demobilization anyway, but on republican forces which had been brought into existence by the revolution. Berlin had a *Sicherheitswehr* or police force commanded by an Independent socialist named Eichhorn, a *Republikanische Soldatenwehr* or civic guard commanded by a majority socialist named Wels, who was the commandant of Berlin, and a *Volksmarinedivision* of revolutionary sailors who had come from Kiel to defend the government. The cabinet also decided to form a *Volkswehr* or national guard to consist of 11,000 men. These various forces were of little or no military value, however, partly because they were divided among themselves (Eichhorn *versus* Wels), partly because they lacked the will to fight, and partly because their officers, who were elected, lacked authority. A proposal made early on in the revolution by Däumig for the establishment of a Red Guard was rejected by the soldiers' councils, which considered that they could give adequate protection to the government. On the Left there was a strong tradition of anti-militarism and a long-cherished belief that force was a weapon worthy only of reactionaries; socialists, it was held, could reach their aims without recourse to it, by appealing to men's reason and conscience. To this aversion from force was added the war-weariness that resulted from long years of harsh discipline and hard conditions. It is not surprising that the German working class was unwilling to continue to bear arms, even for the sake of the socialist republic; but it was, nevertheless, disastrous, as was very soon evident.

The congress of workers' and soldiers' councils, at which a decision was made on these three main themes of democracy, socialism and army reform, has been called the revolutionary parliament. It was the climax of the revolution, the forum in which the hopes and fears unleashed by the revolution found expression, and its debates were the most important which the period produced. It made two things very clear. One was that the bulk of the German working class wished to live in a parliamentary state; the other was that in regard to socialization and demilitarization it wished to carry the revolution very much further than the leaders of the S.P.D. were willing to go. The congress ignored the warnings of those on the Left who argued that these policies could never be carried out through parliament, but only through the proletarian dictatorship of workers' and soldiers' councils. It also ignored the warnings of those on the Right who pointed out the dangers of over-hasty socialization. The congress almost certainly believed, as did many people at the time, that the constituent assembly would have a socialist majority; by-election results at the time justified this expectation. Considerable attention was paid to the view of Cohen, one of the majority socialist speakers at the congress, that an attempt to govern Germany permanently by means of councils would lead to a civil war. Within a month of the congress's dispersal two things had happened which upset their calculations: the election of the constituent assembly took place and failed to produce a socialist majority; and the unleashing of an armed rising by the extreme Left in Berlin brought into play counter-revolutionary forces in the shape of the newly created Freikorps.

V. The Resignation of the Independent Socialists and the January Rising.

On 23 December there began in Berlin the episode known as the sailors' revolt, of which it is impossible to do more than give the barest summary. The quarrel started when the sailors, who were truculent as they feared disbandment, refused to obey a government order to evacuate the royal palace in which they were quartered. Their reaction was to march to the Chancellery, declare Ebert and his startled colleagues arrested, and to arrest Wels, the commandant, against whom they had

a grudge, and imprison him. Ebert thereupon telephoned the army, telling them to act against the sailors to secure Wels' release. Next morning the army appeared in force and shelled the palace. When the sailors surrendered an hour later, Wels was released, but about thirty people had been killed. Meanwhile an attempt at mediation between the government and the sailors had been made on the initiative of the Independent socialists. There exist various accounts of this tangled and deplorable episode; they conflict with one another, and the truth is difficult to establish. The main significance of the affair is that it led directly to the resignation of the Independents from the government. They refused to believe Ebert when he said that he had told the army to save Wels' life, claiming that his intention had been to crush the sailors, not to save Wels. Moreover, the Independents were justifiably indignant with Ebert for having consulted his S.P.D. colleagues but ignored his Independent colleagues before speaking to the army. They accused Ebert of bad faith. The dispute was referred to the Central Council. This was the successor body, on the national level, to the Executive Council, which now was concerned only with Berlin. The Central Council had been elected by the congress of councils, and consisted solely of majority socialists, the Independents having decided to boycott it on the insistence of their Left wing, who considered the powers assigned to it by the congress inadequate. The folly of this boycott was now apparent, for in a dispute between the two socialist parties the all-majority socialist Central Council could hardly side with the Independents. It gave a conciliatory answer to a number of questions put to it by the Independent members of the cabinet, but the latter were not satisfied, and resigned (28 December). The final breach between them and their S.P.D. colleagues was but the culminating point of a series of disagreements ranging, as the cabinet minutes and Barth's Memoirs testify, over all the major subjects of home and foreign policy. Distrust between them had been greatly increased by a combination of episodes that had occurred on 6 December, when soldiers acting under government orders had fired on a crowd of demonstrating Spartacists, killing 16 and seriously wounding 12. Ebert was suspected of collusion with Right wing elements, and as a consequence the extreme Left became more aggressive. Liebknecht's

followers marched armed, almost daily, through the streets of Berlin, and the Spartacist press denounced Ebert as a counter-revolutionary. A manifesto issued by the Spartacists at this time proclaimed that the rule of the working class could be established only by way of armed revolution of the workers, of which the Communists were the forerunners, and that the constituent assembly would be counter-revolutionary. To this the S.P.D. in *Vorwaerts* of 22 December replied that Liebknecht was inciting to civil war but that the workers of Berlin would not support him. The more provocative Spartacus was, the more dependent on the army Ebert became. Yet the sailors' revolt made plain the limitations of this help, for the soldiers who were sent to suppress it showed that they sympathized with the rebels. Like most of the troops of the old army who had been sent to Berlin by agreement between Ebert and the generals, they quickly succumbed to the revolutionary atmosphere of the capital and to the desire to spend Christmas with their families. The lesson drawn from the sailors' revolt by Groener was that the old army must be written off and reliance placed only on the Freikorps which were then being formed, in the first place to protect the Eastern frontier from the Poles and the Russians, and in the second place to combat the Spartacists, in both cases under the slogan of anti-Bolshevism.

The resignation of the Independent socialists removed the last safeguard against the outbreak of a civil war that had been threatening for some time. The extreme Left believed that the government could not prevent it from seizing power. It was not appeased by the resignation of Haase and his colleagues, which had come too late to heal the breach (if such a thing was ever possible) between the Right and Left wings of the Independent party. The Spartacists had at last decided to part company with the Independents, whom they blamed for co-responsibility for, or connivance at, the policy of the hated Ebert government. At the end of December the Spartacists and other tiny Left wing groups founded the German Communist party. In its first programme the new party declared that it would "never take over the power of government except by the clear, unambiguous will of the majority of the proletarian masses in Germany". At the same time it decided, against the advice of its best leaders, including Rosa

Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, not to take part in the elections to the constituent assembly. Though small, it was not a united party, and, as the policy of its chief organ, *Die rote Fahne*, and its day to day activities showed, its practice did not match its theory. There was a strong likelihood that the revolutionary *Obleute* would join the Communists, but negotiations between them broke down. At the same time the *Obleute* and Left wing leaders of the U.S.P.D. were on very bad terms with Haase, for political not personal reasons. Haase, despite these difficulties, was optimistic about the future; he wrote on 1 January that the first phase of the revolution was over, but the revolution itself would go on. This was also Rosa Luxemburg's belief; the second phase, she declared, would see the social and economic revolution which would complete the political one.

Berlin at the end of December and beginning of January was the scene of gigantic demonstrations by hostile crowds, one S.P.D., one Spartacist, both claiming to represent "the people", both denouncing the other for terrorism. Many of the demonstrators were armed. The government could hardly carry on, being almost a prisoner in its own capital. The cabinet was now united, two majority socialists having been co-opted to replace the Independents. One of the new men was Noske, who became responsible for army matters. At this crisis he was made commander-in-chief of Berlin and given the task of suppressing the Spartacists, who controlled a large part of the city. The rising, which began at this time (6 January), was touched off by an attempt of the Prussian government, which, following the example of the Reich government, now consisted entirely of majority socialists, to dismiss the police chief, Eichhorn, whose Left wing sympathies were well known. Eichhorn defied the dismissal order, and the Left treated it as a *casus belli*. A revolutionary committee consisting of *Obleute* and Spartacists met and declared the government deposed. The declaration was signed by Liebknecht, Ledebour and an *Obmann* named Scholze. The rising was badly organized and much of the armed help on which the rebels counted did not materialize. The Spartacists seized newspaper offices and other buildings, but by the end of the week (11 January) the government had begun its reconquest of the city. Noske had collected the Freikorps, which proved

more than a match for the Spartacists. The rebel leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Liebknecht, who had refused to leave Berlin despite the danger, were arrested, taken to the headquarters of the *Garde-Kavallerie-Schutzendivision* in the Eden Hotel, and murdered in cold blood while on the way to prison at Moabit. Ledebour had already been arrested. The first atrocities, which were to be a tragic but characteristic feature of the latter stages of the German revolution, now took place, and included the shooting and mishandling of prisoners.

Within a few days of the Spartacist rising in Berlin the constituent assembly was elected. The results gave 38 per cent of votes cast to the S.P.D. and 7 per cent to the Independents. The S.P.D. invited the latter to join them in a coalition which would necessarily have included at least one non-socialist party; the offer was brusquely rejected, for the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht had widened the breach between them. The majority socialists, desiring a broadly based coalition, formed a government with the Progressives and Centre. On 6 February the constituent assembly met at Weimar and passed a provisional constitution. Ebert became President, Scheidemann Prime Minister.

VI. *The Consequences of Revolutionary Failure.*

The establishment of parliamentary government with the meeting of the constituent assembly at Weimar and the formation of a bourgeois-socialist coalition government in February 1919 marked, in a formal sense, the end of the German revolution. The regime of workers' and soldiers' councils was over, though many Independents in them put up stiff rearguard opposition to their loss of power. The council idea was retained in the Weimar constitution to the extent that specific economic functions, and even limited political ones, were assigned to workers' councils in industry (*Betriebsräte*). In the new, provisional Reichswehr which replaced the old, Imperial army, there was no place for soldiers' councils, and all hope of putting the Hamburg Points into effect vanished after the January rising. The Spartacist attempt to seize power flared up in other places besides Berlin. In Bremen the Spartacists and Left wing Independents declared a dictatorship of the proletariat which lasted only a few days and was supported only by a minority; then Bremen was

occupied by Noske's forces, who reinstalled the majority socialists in power. Similar outbreaks occurred elsewhere and were similarly suppressed. The Left wing Independents, who had been disillusioned by their failure at the polls in January, were embittered by Noske's use of the reactionary Freikorps to crush revolutionary movements. Many individual majority socialists regretted this dependence on the Freikorps, but saw no other way of meeting the Spartacist challenge. The industrial workers felt cheated because they had not got socialism, and in the Ruhr took steps to seize the coal mines. The government passed a framework socialization act, but this was not followed by socialization as the Left understood it. General strikes broke out in many districts, including Berlin, where street fighting followed, in the course of which 1,200 people lost their lives.

The political consequence of these events was that the Independent socialist party abandoned its belief in parliamentary methods of achieving socialism, and at its conference in Berlin in March adopted a programme which included for the first time a demand for proletarian dictatorship to be exercised by workers' councils, adding the qualifying phrase "as representatives of the great majority of the nation". Significantly, this qualification was dropped at the party's next conference at Leipzig in December 1919. In Bavaria the extreme Left declared a council dictatorship in April; this tragi-comic regime was suppressed by the army with bloodshed. The final consequence of the shift to the Left inside the U.S.P.D. was the party's split in October 1920 and the absorption of a considerable part of it into the Communist party. Their experience of the Weimar regime made many socialists reject parliamentary democracy. On the Left many people still believed that a revolutionary situation like that of November 1918, of which they felt so little use had been made, would recur, and next time they were determined not to bungle it through democratic inhibitions. As to the S.P.D., it had a thankless task, having to shoulder most of the unpopularity acquired by the government that signed the Versailles treaty, and to make the compromises which its situation as a partner in coalition governments demanded. These compromises brought it the scorn of the Left, without winning it respect from the nationalist Right. The

election of June 1920 placed the Weimar coalition in a minority. Socialization and demilitarization had not been put into effect; now it appeared that democracy was in danger, less than three months after the failure of the Kapp Putsch, both from the Right and from the Left.

VII. *Conclusion.*

The German revolution suffered from a threefold handicap, which, it may be said, doomed it from the start, and which was inherent in the historical circumstances that gave it birth.

First, the revolution, like the Weimar republic which followed it, was the product of defeat. This meant that for a large section of the population the revolutionaries were traitors, and democracy and socialism were associated with national humiliation. The stab in the back legend, which cast its baneful shadow over the Weimar republic, had its origin during the days of revolution and defeat; in its crudest form it implied that the Left wanted Germany to lose the war in order to carry out its reforms. For this reason opposition to the men of November 1918 was much greater than it would otherwise have been, especially among the middle classes.

Secondly, there was the fact that the socialists were divided. This division was beginning to appear before the war, but the war brought it to a head, and the gulf between the two wings of German socialism was widened by the Russian revolution. How could a revolution succeed when the leaders of one party were satisfied with the reforms of October 1918 and considered the revolution over on 9 November, while those of the other (especially its Left wing) saw in the events of that day only the beginning of its changes they desired?

Thirdly, the German revolution did not conform to the type German socialists had been trained to expect. They thought in terms of Marxist revolution, in which the capitalist economic system would collapse. What happened in Germany in November 1918 was not a collapse of capitalism, but a weakening of state power owing to military defeat. If the capitalists were without capital and raw materials at the time, that was due to the blockade and the lost war, not to any inherent weakness of the system. The revolution began in mess-rooms and barracks, not in factories and workshops, and the enemy was

the officer not the employer. That the revolution was a rejection of militarism rather than of capitalism was recognized even by Liebknecht, who wrote in *Die rote Fahne* of 19 November 1918:

The bulk of the soldiers are revolutionary against militarism, against war and the open representatives of imperialism: in relation to socialism they are still divided, hesitant and immature.

Liebknecht also admitted that by then many of the proletarian soldiers and workers "fondly imagined" the revolution to be over, and wanted nothing but rest and demobilization. But neither in Marxist theory nor in S.P.D. tactics had it ever been expected that the revolution would start as a trial of strength between soldiers or sailors and officers. When the army High Command through its pact with Ebert became a factor in the political struggle the Left had no comparable force to use against it. As we have seen, the Left expected to win political power by weight of numbers and rejected the idea of forming a Red Guard. Its failure to win the election of January 1919 outright was a disappointment, and a blow to the party theorists, who expected the socialist vote to be commensurate with the working class share of the population, which was over half. When, in January 1919, the small group of Spartacists and *Obleute* resorted to force, they were overthrown by the Freikorps. Scheidemann, writing of the Kapp Putsch of March 1920, saw it as a consequence of the role which the Spartacists had provoked the Freikorps to play: "without Ledebour," he put it, "there would have been no Lüttwitz". (Lüttwitz was the Reichswehr general who was Kapp's accomplice.) Thus the Left should either have refrained from using force altogether, or built up a republican force that could have played the part of a red army. Had it chosen the second alternative, civil war would have been inevitable, and it is unlikely that the Left could have won such a war. By using force, even though inadequately and inefficiently, the Left provoked the nationalist Right, and thus endangered nearly all the gains of October and November 1918.

In themselves, the gains of the November revolution did little more than complete the formal democratization of

Germany's political structure which Prince Max of Baden's constitutional reforms had begun. The dynasties were deposed, class franchise in the states was abolished, the secret ballot was guaranteed, votes were given to women, and proportional representation was introduced. Psychologically, the November revolution was important for the sense which it gave to the ordinary man that he was free, that he could exercise some degree of political power, that at last reform could come from below, not only, as so often in Germany, from above. It is difficult to assess the effect of the revolution on the country's social life, but it certainly existed. On the other hand, the revolution's failure to infuse a new spirit into the civil service and the judicial system was a mistake for which it was to pay dearly. That the revolution had failed in so far as it was socialist was evident by the spring of 1919; and it was a realization of this which caused the Independent socialists to abandon democratic socialism and brought about their enstrangement from the Weimar regime. That the revolution was a partial failure in so far as it was liberal and democratic became clear soon afterwards, as (among other things) the success of the Right- and Left-wing extremists in the election of June 1920 showed. Thus the weaknesses and incompatibilities which resulted from the half-completed revolution were inherited by the republic to which the revolution gave birth, and were reproduced in that republic's troubled history.

NOTE ON BOOKS

There is no definitive history of the German revolution in English. The causes of the revolution are well analysed in Arthur Rosenberg's *Birth of the German Republic* (London, 1931) and its main features are described in the first few chapters of the same author's *History of the German Republic* (London, 1936). A useful selection from the findings of the Reichstag Committee of Inquiry into the causes of the German collapse in 1918 is contained in R. H. Lutz's *Documents of the German Revolution* (Stanford University, California, 1932). This Committee's official Report in 12 volumes (Berlin, 1925-28) is a mine of information for those who read German. Several books of memoirs by those who took part in the revolution have been translated. Among them are Prince Max of Baden's *Memoirs* (2 volumes, London, 1928) and Philipp Scheidemann's *Memoirs of a Social Democrat* (2 volumes, London, 1929). An Independent socialist account is Heinrich Stroebel's *The German Revolution and after* (London, 1928), while Paul Froelich's *Rosa Luxemburg* (London, 1940) gives the Spartacist point of view. Light on the revolution in the provinces is thrown by Albert Grzesinski's *Inside Germany* (New York, 1939) and Toni Sender's *Autobiography of a German Rebel* (London, 1940). Autobiographical material on the revolution is contained in the early part of Ruth Fischer's *Stalin and German Communism* (London and Oxford, 1945). A general study of the S.P.D. during the war and the revolution is A. J. Berlau's *The German Social Democratic Party, 1914-21* (Columbia U.P., 1949). A recent work is Rudolf Coper's *The Revolution which failed: Germany in 1918-19* (Cambridge U.P., 1955) but this is an unbalanced book and must be used with caution.

The following is a short list of recommended books in German:

- Barth, Emil, *Aus der Werkstatt der deutschen Revolution* (Berlin, 1919).
Bernstein, Eduard, *Die deutsche Revolution* (Berlin, 1921).
Ebert, Friedrich, *Schriften, Aufzeichnungen, Reden* (2 volumes, Dresden, 1926).
Froelich, Paul, *10 Jahre Krieg und Bürgerkrieg* (Berlin, 1924).
Haase, Ernst, *Hugo Haase, sein Leben und Wirken* (Berlin, n.d.).
Ledebour, Georg (ed.), *Der Ledebour Prozess* (Berlin, 1919).
Liebknecht, Karl, *Ausgewählte Reden, Briefe und Aufsätze* (Berlin, 1952).
Müller, Hermann, *Die November Revolution* (Berlin, 1928).
Müller, Richard *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik* (2 volumes, Vienna, 1925).
Müller, Richard, *Der Bürgerkrieg in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1925).
Noske, Gustav, *Von Kiel bis Kapp* (Berlin, 1920).
Prager, Eugen, *Geschichte der U.S.P.D.* (Berlin, 1921).
Schüddekopf, Ernst (ed.), *Heer und Republik: Quellen zur Politik der Reichswehrführung, 1918-33* (Hanover and Frankfurt, 1955).
Tormin, Walter, *Zwischen Rätediktatur und sozialer Demokratie* (Düsseldorf, 1954).